

Harsh Harvest for Local Growers

By KEITH L. MARTIN

There are a few sure signs of fall in Southeastern Massachusetts: the thermometer dips lower each day, the leaves take on a new shade of colors and cranberry farmers take to the bogs to gather the year's harvest.

This year, however, while the first two indicators are upon us, the cranberry crop in Duxbury and other towns is causing more frustration than fruit so far.

"We are at the end of a real long season where we have had difficulty with insects really showing an impact on the harvest as well as fruit rot," said Jeff LaFleur, executive director of the Cape Cod

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cranberries



Ricker walks one of his pickers throughout the bog as it rakes the berries off the vines and into bags on the back.

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Cranberry Growers' Association. "This could potentially be four years in a row with bad crops."

LaFleur said that after two years of USDA-mandated restrictions on supply and last year's drought, farmers were looking toward this year to bring better news.

"Prices [of cranberries per barrel] were rebounding a little and many saw a year to recover and Mother Nature snatched that away," said LaFleur.

This has caused many who make a living in cranberries in Duxbury and surrounding towns to seek alternative sources of income, said LaFleur, and caused lots of frustration among farmers.

"Imagine it was you or I, working 40 hours a week and when you get your check, 30 percent of it is gone," he said. "That's what it is like [for cranberry farmers] working all year to produce a crop and when it is time to harvest, 30 percent of the crop is gone. That's a substantial blow to these folks financially and emotionally."

In fact, many cranberry farmers the *Clipper* contacted did not want to discuss this year's crop on the record.

Those who did had mixed reviews.

Stan Merry's family has had bogs in Duxbury since the late 1800's and he still owns nearly 58 acres in town. While he has the equipment to harvest, Merry says that he won't get enough return to pick the berries and ship them.

Merry, however, is optimistic about the future.

"I think next year, things will change around," he said.

Merry knows weather can be a killer to farmers and credits a bad frost for part of his misfortunes this year. He also realizes that the cranberry market is changing, with more berries being harvested in Wisconsin and a giant surge of bogs in Canada, making up for



Cranberry farmer Earle Ricker (left) and his brother Jack (right) get ready to dry harvest this year's crop, some of which will go to Ocean Spray.

the lack of production in other areas like Massachusetts.

Unlike Merry, Duxbury bog owner Earle Ricker is a little more optimistic about his harvest.

A third generation farmer, Ricker and his brother Jack have been working on the family's bogs off Mayflower Street for the past couple of weeks dry picking berries and seeing a good quality and quantity of fruit.

"For us, it hasn't been too bad," said Ricker who has worked under contract for Ocean Spray since 1971. "We had a real rainy season, but the [end of summer] was not so bad; so we've had some good luck."

While it is still early in the season and with many berries yet to be picked, Ricker does not want to seem too optimistic regarding his harvest.

"I won't know [how the harvest was] until I get paid," he said. "I never count my chickens until the crop comes in so to speak."

In working with Ocean Spray, Ricker also has the potential to get an extra incentive for fresh fruit berries on top of what he produces for juice. If the harvest produces enough, he could be looking at more income.

"While the base price [per barrel] is still below the cost of production, if I get a good

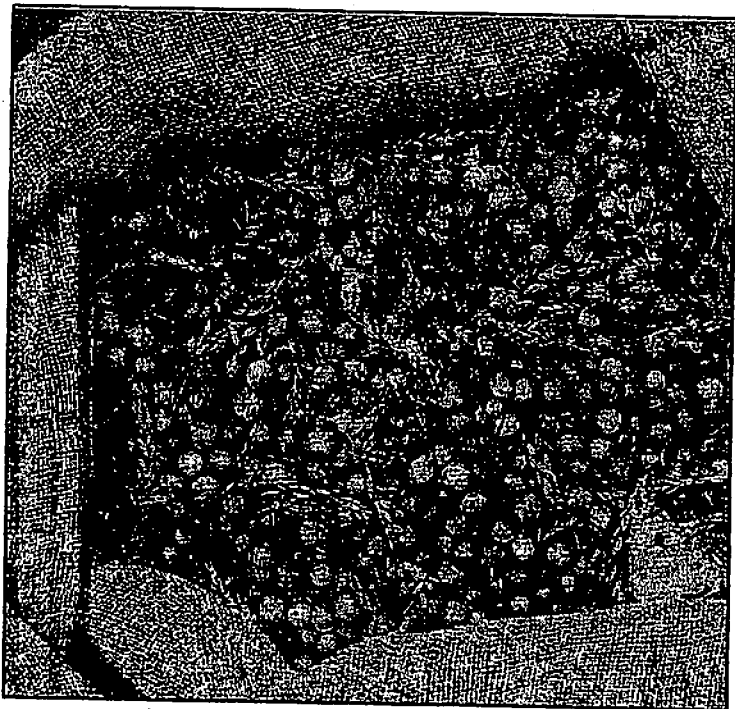
incentive, I might break even or do better," he said.

With Plymouth County the largest cranberry-producing region of the state, LaFleur said that bad harvests will have a serious impact on the USDA's projections for Massachusetts, a state that produces over 25 percent of the United States cranberry crop worth nearly 48 million dollars. For 2003, the USDA's projection is 1.7 million barrels, an increase from 1.4 barrels last year.

"At this point, I'm not sure I believe we'll get near [the 2003 projection]," said LaFleur.

With uncertain results facing a lot of farmers, LaFleur hears their concerns but knows many will stay strong and survive this season with better hopes for the future.

"I hear their frustrations, but I also hear their resiliency," he said. "Because they farm, they deal with Mother Nature and they have the greatest respect for her nature to give and take away. I know [a bad harvest] hurts them financially and they are at the mercy of weather like this, so for that, I have the deepest respect for them."



Growers are hopeful the cranberry crop will produce enough berries like this to sustain the cost of harvesting this year.